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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, many teachers see their roles encompassing not only teaching specific content and mentoring students, but also functioning as front-line social workers. This Digest examines factors that may influence teacher morale and offers suggestions for preserving or restoring morale. Administrative support and leadership, good student behavior, a positive school atmosphere, and teacher autonomy are working conditions associated with higher teacher satisfaction. Parental support and teachers' perceptions of students and student learning are also important influences on teacher morale. (Contains 16 references.) (MLH)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Teacher Morale

By Linda Lumsden

Teachers are being stretched to the limit. Expectations placed on them seem to be expanding exponentially. Increasingly their role encompasses not only teaching specific content and mentoring students in the love of learning, but functioning as frontline social workers.

In addition to being expected to deal with a smorgasbord of broader social problems that find their way into the classroom, many other pressures plague teachers, prompting Parks (1983) to ask, "How does one compensate professionals for inadequate books and supplies, large classes, disruptive students, public criticism, limited assistance, increased duties, and the lowest salaries paid to highly educated personnel in the nation? How does one lead a group in which morale is so low that over 40 percent of survey respondents would not again select teaching as a profession and 57 percent are definitely planning to leave, will leave if something better comes along, or are undecided about staying?"

Although Parks posed these questions in 1983, it appears that similar levels of dissatisfaction persist among teachers today. For example, a survey of Texas public school teachers in 1996 found that 44 percent of respondents were seriously considering leaving the profession (Henderson and Henderson 1996).

This Digest examines factors that may influence teacher morale and offers suggestions for preserving or restoring morale.

What Is Teacher Morale?

Morale has been thought of variously as a feeling, a state of mind, a mental attitude, and an emotional attitude (Mendel 1987).

One source defines *morale* as the feeling a worker has about his job based on how the worker perceives himself in the organization and the extent to which the organization is viewed as meeting the worker's own needs and expectations (Washington and Watson 1976).

Another author conceptualizes *morale* as "the professional interest and enthusiasm that a person displays towards the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation" (Bentley and Rempel 1980).

When a healthy school environment exists and teacher morale is high, "teachers feel good about each other and, at the same time, feel a sense of accomplishment from their jobs" (Hoy and Miskel 1987).

What Are Some Factors that Affect Teacher Morale?

As noted above, a healthy school environment and high teacher morale tend to be related. A principal's ability to create a positive school climate and culture can affect teacher morale. As Adams (1992) states, "Principals, who control many of the contingencies in the work environment and are the source of much reinforcement for teaching behavior, are the keys to improving the morale and self-esteem of teachers."

A recent report on job satisfaction among American teachers identified "more administrative support and leadership, good student behavior, a positive school atmosphere, and teacher autonomy" as working conditions associated with higher teacher satisfaction (National Center for Education Statistics 1997). Favorable workplace conditions were positively related to teacher' job satisfaction regardless of whether a teacher was employed by a public or private school, an elementary or secondary school, and regardless of teachers' background characteristics or school demographics (National Center for Education Statistics).

The study also found that "teachers in any school setting who receive a great deal of parental support are more satisfied than teachers who do not." A weak relationship was found between teacher satisfaction and salary and benefits (National Center for Education Statistics).

Teachers' perceptions of students and student learning can also affect their morale. In a cross-cultural study of teacher enthusiasm and discouragement that included teachers from the U.S. and six other nations, "Teachers clearly identified students as the primary and central factor that has an impact on both their professional enthusiasm and discouragement.... Teachers almost universally treasure student responsiveness and enthusiasm as a vital factor in their own enthusiasm, and conversely list low motivation in students as a discourager" (Stenlund 1995).

Because of their relative isolation from other adults, teachers have little opportunity to share their successes with colleagues and administrators. This results in greater reliance on student responsiveness for teachers' professional satisfaction (Goodwin 1987).

Stress also affects morale. It can "result in emotional and physical fatigue and a reduction in work motivation, involvement, and satisfaction" (Stenlund). Feeling overly stressed can result in erosion of one's idealism, sense of purpose, and enthusiasm.

Why Is Teacher Morale Important?

Miller (1981) notes that teacher morale "can have a positive effect on

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pupil attitudes and learning. Raising teacher morale level is not only making teaching more pleasant for teachers, but also learning more pleasant for the students. This creates an environment that is more conducive to learning."

Morale and achievement are also related. Ellenberg (1972) found that "where morale was high, schools showed an increase in student achievement."

Conversely, low levels of satisfaction and morale can lead to decreased teacher productivity and burnout, which is associated with "a loss of concern for and detachment from the people with whom one works, decreased quality of teaching, depression, greater use of sick leave, efforts to leave the profession, and a cynical and dehumanized perception of students" (Mendel citing Holt 1980).

In short, the morale of teachers can have far-reaching implications for "student learning, the health of the organization, and the health of the teacher" (Mendel).

What Steps Can Teachers Take To Preserve or Raise Their Morale?

Sometimes teacher morale drops almost imperceptibly over time, so subtly that teachers may not be fully cognizant of the decline. Nothing can change, however, in the absence of awareness. If teachers to be encouraged, they must first recognize their diminished status —that they are "*dis*couraged—and take action to become 'couraged' again" (Bolin 1987).

Reassessment, when coupled with renewal, can often lead to encouragement. *Reassessment* involves reexamining something in order to value it again (Bolin). And *renewal* "implies recovery. To become renewed, teachers must reopen the case for teaching, looking again at why they chose to set out on such a vocational venture" (Bolin).

Berman (1987) also emphasizes the need for individuals "to give attention to the care and replenishing of self if they are to be dynamic, sensitive, perceptive persons—persons who get excited about ideas and people. Teachers need to be able to keep the freshness and spark that frequently mark a novice in the field, while at the same time embedding freshness in wisdom and thoughtfulness."

Berman advises teachers to consider what is uplifting and energizing for them and then work toward integrating those things more fully into their lives. She suggests breaking out of routines and doing the unusual, planning for next steps in professional development, developing a network of individuals to dialogue with, and investing fully in tasks at hand as routes to replenishment.

How Can Administrators Influence Teacher Morale?

People who feel empowered tend to have higher morale. As Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan (1993) state, "People are more personally invested in their work with an organization when (1) they have a voice in what happens to them; and (2) their work has meaning and significance in contributing to a higher purpose or goal."

When teachers' sense of self-determination and purpose are supported, teachers relate to students in a qualitatively different manner (Maehr, Midgley, and Urdan).

By treating teachers in ways that empower them, such as involving them in decisions about policies and practices and acknowledging their expertise, administrators can help sustain teacher morale.

Principals can also strengthen teacher morale by actively standing behind teachers. Effective principals serve as guardians of teachers' instructional time, "assist teachers with student discipline matters, allow teachers to develop discipline codes, and support teachers' authority in enforcing policy" (Blase and Kirby 1992).

Although teachers can take steps individually to preserve their professional satisfaction and morale, they must also be nurtured, supported, and valued by the broader school community. When teachers are provided with what they need to remain inspired and enthusiastic in the classroom, students as well as teachers will be the beneficiaries.

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